Milwaukee Symphony

Musical Journeys

WEEKLY STREAMING PROGRAMS

Episode 7 Notes

EDWARD ELGAR

Born 2 June 1857; Broadheath, England
Died 23 February 1934; Worcester, England

Serenade in E minor for String Orchestra, Opus 20

Composed: 1892
First performance: 21 July 1896; Antwerp, Belgium

Prior to the success of the *Enigma Variations* and Cello Concerto, Edward Elgar was a composer of relative obscurity, making ends meet by freelancing as a violinist in various orchestras and serving as the director of music at the Powick Lunatic Asylum, where he conducted a band made up of attendants and inmates. Elgar completed his String Serenade just after leaving his position at Powick, and its musical language, idiomatically written for string orchestra, was undoubtedly informed by Elgar's experience as a freelance violinist.

The exact genesis of the String Serenade is shrouded in mystery, but seems to have been derived from Elgar's *Three Pieces for String Orchestra*, which he composed in 1888. Unfortunately, the manuscript of the *Three Pieces* has been lost; however, a program from the first performance remains. From that program, we learn that Elgar had assigned specific names to each of the three movements: "Spring Song," "Elegy," and "Finale." The three-movement structure of the String Serenade, combined with the fitting correlation between the movement titles, have led scholars to conclude that the String Serenade was likely a revised version of the *Three Pieces*.

Elgar completed the String Serenade in the spring of 1892, just in time to present the work as a third anniversary gift to his beloved wife, Alice. The String Serenade did not receive its professional premiere until 1896, yet remained for years a favorite work for Elgar. Elgar at one point wrote to his friend Charles Buck about the Serenade: "I like 'em – best thing I ever did." His affinity for his Serenade is manifested in the fact that it was the last piece Elgar himself recorded before his death in 1934.

The first movement begins with a playful, rhythmically incessant figure in the violas, which returns throughout the movement. This makes way for a wistful and pastoral theme, with beautifully polyphonic writing for the entire string orchestra. The Larghetto is the emotional crux of the work, with a gorgeously delicate melody that Elgar develops beautifully through the movement. The elegiac character of the first movement returns in the Allegretto, with a subtle nod to the Serenade's opening near the end.

Program notes by Isaac Thompson

In the South (Alassio), Opus 50

Composed: 1903-04
First performance: 16 March 1904; London, England

Edward Elgar is no stranger to lovers of classical music. He is best known for his orchestral works – *Enigma Variations*, *Pomp and Circumstance* marches, concertos for violin and cello, and two noble symphonies. He was also an enthusiastic composer of choral music, writing oratorios, cantatas, part songs, and church music. In 2013, MSO audiences were fortunate to hear *The Dream of Gerontius*, arguably the finest oratorio ever penned by an Englishman.

Figuring among Elgar's orchestral works are two splendid concert overtures, *Cockaigne* (1901) and *In the South* (1904). Many writers have observed that the latter is really a tone poem, one that easily bears comparison with Richard Strauss. In this instance, the "South" refers to Italy – more specifically, to the town of Alassio, situated on the Italian Rivera, halfway between Genoa and Nice. Elgar and his family spent the Christmas and New Year holidays there in 1903-04. It became their favorite vacation destination.

After the success of the *Enigma Variations* (1899), Elgar's compatriots had hoped he might be the one to pen the "great British symphony," a work that would pose a challenge to the continental composers who dominated the field at that time. In 1903, he had a great success with the premiere of his oratorio *The Apostles*. However, it did little to relieve the pressure Elgar felt to write a true symphony, the one he knew his nation expected. In traveling to Italy with his wife Alice, he had hoped a two-month holiday there might be the tonic he needed.

In Alassio, the longed-for symphony did not materialize, but Elgar's surroundings did inspire music within him, but music suitable for a smaller canvas. Initial inspiration came during an afternoon stroll near Alassio. "I was by the side of an old Roman way. A peasant stood by an old ruin and in a flash it all came to me – the conflict of armies in that very spot long ago, where now I stood – the contrast of the ruin and the shepherd – and then all of a sudden, I came back to reality. In that time I had 'composed' the overture – the rest was really writing it down."

The leaping, exultant opening theme represented, said Elgar, "Maybe the exhilarating out-of-doors feeling arising from the gloriously beautiful surroundings – streams, flowers, hills; the distant snow mountains in one direction and the blue Mediterranean in the other."

We next hear a pastoral portrait of "a shepherd with his flock straying about the ruins of the old church – he piping softly and reedily and occasionally singing." There follows a pugnacious, march-like passage meant to depict "the relentless and domineering [Roman] forces of the ancient day, and to give a sound-picture of the strife and wars, the 'drums and tramplings' of a later time."

The nocturne-like scene that follows offers a marked contrast: A solo viola introduces the theme, reminiscent of a Neapolitan song, before passing it to the solo horn. (Repeated requests led to its separate publication as "In Moonlight," set to a text by Shelley.) Once the flight of fancy has had its say, Elgar recapitulates the themes of the opening, including the quieter rustic passage, before an emphatically triumphant conclusion.

Program notes by J. Mark Baker

Concerto in E minor for Cello and Orchestra, Opus 85

Composed: 1918-19
First performance: 27 October 1919; London, England

Aged and anguished by the First World War, Elgar felt the loss of many friends, both English and German. Plagued by failing health and financial security, he lamented: "I am more alone and the prey of circumstances than ever before… Everything good and nice and clean and fresh and sweet is far away – never to return." Retreating from the world, Elgar and his wife rented a country cottage in Sussex in 1917. Gradually, his creative strength returned. During the summer of 1919, Elgar penned one of his most significant works and also his last major composition, the Cello Concerto. While in the compositional process, Elgar wrote to the work's dedicatees, Sir Sidney and Lady Colvin, that it was "a real large work and I think *good* and alive."

Unfortunately, the next few years held many difficulties for both the composer and his new work. The concerto was scheduled to be premiered by the English cellist, Felix Salmond (1888-1952), on 27 October 1919, with Elgar conducting the London Symphony. Albert Coates, the other conductor on this shared program, used more than his allotted rehearsal time; Elgar was therefore not able to prepare the performance to his liking. He would have withdrawn the work from this concert, had it not been such an important occasion for Salmond. Clouded by an insecure premiere, this concerto – the simplest, most direct, and least rhetorical of Elgar's major works – was long misunderstood by musicians and audiences.

Heartbroken by the death of his wife shortly thereafter, Elgar resolved never to compose again. He kept his vow for nine years; then, in 1929, composed a hymn of prayer for the recovery of King George V from a serious illness. Elgar later began a Third Symphony that was still unfinished at the time of his death in 1934.

Virtuosic, but not superficial, the Cello Concerto provides a unique glimpse of the inner Elgar, a man who concealed a sensitive and complex nature behind the façade of a country squire. When asked to "explain" this work, he replied enigmatically, "A man's attitude to life."

Scholar Diana McVeagh provided these insights:

> It was into a virtuoso form that he confied his most private thoughts. So much is made of the poignance of the Cello Concerto that its daring can be overlooked. But there is a consummate technical confidence in opening a concerto with a solo recitative with such panache, allowing it to die to nothing, and then presenting so gentle and unobtrusive a main theme for violas alone. In the tension between the risks taken by the craftsman and the shyness of the aging man, Elgar turned his disillusion to positive account. The concerto is simply lyrical and rondo forms. The scherzo is a shadowy, fantastic *moto perpetuo*, the Adagio a passionate lament. The Falstaffian last movement runs a humorous course before the stricken cadenza, in which soloist and orchestra sing the pain and poetry of Elgar's most searching visions, reaching stillness in a phrase from the Adagio. Elgar cut resolutely into this with the formal recitative of the opening; and the end is abrupt.

Program notes by Roger Ruggeri